Book review: Electoral Politics in Africa since 1990 - Continuity in Change

Heyl, Charlotte

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Heyl, C. (2019). Book review: Electoral Politics in Africa since 1990 - Continuity in Change. [Review of the book *Electoral politics in Africa: change and continuity since 1995*, by J. Bleck, & N. Van de Walle]. *Africa Spectrum*, *54*(3), 282-284. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002039719887977

GIGA | Africa Spectrum

Book review

Africa Spectrum
2019, Vol. 54(3) 282–284

DOI: 10.1177/0002039719887977
journals.sagepub.com/home/afr
SAGE

Bleck, Jaimie, and Nicolas van de Walle (2019), *Electoral Politics in Africa since 1990. Continuity in Change*, New York: Cambridge University Press, ISBN 978-1-316-61247-7 (paperback), 331 pages

Roughly 30 years after Africa's encounter with the third wave of democratisation and 20 after the publication of Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle's seminal book *Democratic Experiments in Africa*, Jaimie Bleck and van de Walle now take stock of a quarter-century of multiparty elections on the continent. Their main observation is that regular elections have been institutionalised in sub-Saharan Africa by becoming "the default option of politics" (6), but that this development has also not resulted in the consolidation of democracy. Instead, "most African political systems continue to be characterized by abuses of power and a less-than-stellar respect for the political rights of citizens" (5). The authors consider this "continuity in change" the core puzzle to be addressed by their book.

It is organised into eight chapters. After the introduction of the "Puzzle of Electoral Continuity" (chapter 1), the authors provide an overview of the "Evolution of Electoral Competition" (chapter 2) and then analyse the "Impact of Elections on Democracy" (chapter 3). Subsequently, they turn to more specific issues and examine political parties (chapter 4), candidates, and their electoral campaigns (chapter 5), the specific issues raised during presidential campaigns (chapter 6), and the "African Voter" (chapter 7), before they finally draw together their conclusions (chapter 8). Bleck and van de Walle call in their analysis on an extensive literature review, as well as on empirical data. The latter comprises overview data for the African continent on issues such as the evolution of electoral competition or the Facebook usage of presidential candidates, as well as more in-depth data on eight countries: Benin, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia. The selected countries are meant to cover different regions, colonial legacies, and levels of democratic consolidation. In addition, they embed their analysis in empirical illustrations from across the continent.

In the first chapter, the authors explain the lack of democratic consolidation despite the holding of over 500 multiparty elections on the national level since 1990 by way of two major factors. First, presidentialism prevails formally as the dominant system of government and informally through clientelistic networks. The incumbency advantage that stems from this largely unchecked presidential power prevents the emergence of

viable opposition forces. Second, the "liability of newness" (11) hampers meaningful change. They argue that in comparison to other world regions such as Latin America, most African countries do not have a long history of holding competitive elections. In spite of them becoming a regular part of political life in the last few decades, political experience is still nascent and so actors tend to rely on political practices learned during the first decades after independence. Furthermore, the liability of newness comes with a high degree of uncertainty. For example, African political parties are still uncertain about their voters, while voters are unsure whether opposition forces would make good incumbents. Throughout the book, the authors further develop their argument and illustrate how these two major factors are at play.

In their introductory assessments of the repercussions of African multiparty elections, Bleck and van de Walle neither echo Lindberg's initially optimistic theory of the democratising power of elections nor do they consider elections a threat to stability and peace. They argue, rather, that elections offer "a moment of temporary and political fluidity" (16) in which the choices available to political actors expand, and in which political changes as well as institutional innovations become more likely. However, these moments are brief, and the changes triggered do not necessarily enhance democracy. Furthermore, regimes that can count on oil rents, military backing, or the legitimisation narrative of a revolutionary party are less vulnerable to change through elections.

Among the many insights that the book offers the reader, a short summary of chapter 4 on political parties exemplifies how the authors trace the aforementioned continuity in change. In this chapter, they argue that the decolonisation period was the decisive critical juncture for African parties – having a far more lasting impact than the introduction of multiparty elections in the 1990s would. Apart from a historical account on the emergence of single parties, they show that the career origins of many current African high-level politicians can still be traced back to the respective erstwhile single party. However, the legacy of post-independence party formation is not only reflected in the political personnel currently on stage but also in political practices. Accordingly, "many leaders learned to employ elections as tools of power maintenance and legitimacy" (113) and relied on "vertical networks of mobilization" (114) such as brokerage through traditional authorities because these elite-centred parties had only low levels of citizen–party linkages. Yet, the authors also show that many of those single parties that lost power in the 1990s were thereafter not able to return to the political stage. Nevertheless, the pattern of there being one dominant party in the legislature that faces only a paucity of viable opposition parties has survived.

Throughout the book, the authors point to trends that may alter the trodden paths of Africa's political regimes. Among them are increasing urbanisation, innovation in the use of information technology, and a surging number of young voters. While the average age of presidential candidates in Africa in the last few decades was 58 years old – which resembles that of presidential candidates in the United States, but is nevertheless three times higher than the average age of the African population as a whole – recent years have also seen the emergence of young candidates. An example is Julius Malema, the Economic Freedom Fighters' leading figure in the 2014 and 2019 South African

parliamentary elections. The authors assume that political strategies may change as old elites die out. Their successors will not be able to uphold previous levels of control and support. Moreover, Bleck and van de Walle stress that traditional brokerage strategies work less effectively in urban settings, that urban voters tend to support opposition forces, and that social media can help to mitigate the incumbency advantage by bypassing the constraints of traditional media formats.

The book has two major strengths. First, it offers a multifaceted perspective on African elections and assesses their repercussions in a nuanced way. Second, the authors build their analysis on their excellent and up-to-date reading of the African elections-related literature as well as on their profound empirical knowledge. As such, the book represents an excellent introduction to the field of African elections for students of African politics as well as for researchers newly delving into the topics at hand.

Charlotte Heyl
Research Fellow, GIGA Institute of African Affairs,
Hamburg, Germany